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# *Here and There: Contemporary Feminisms, Art Practices and Globalized Geography*

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Translator: Phoebe Clarke



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# *Here and There: Contemporary Feminisms, Art Practices and Globalized Geography*

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## REFERENCES

*Féminismes du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle : une troisième vague ?*, Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017, (Archives du Féminisme). Sous la dir. de Karine Bergès, Florence Binard, Alexandrine Guyard-Nedelec

*Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, Londres : Routledge, 2018. Sous la dir. de Jacqueline Millner, Catriona Moore

Basia Sliwinska, *The Female Body in the Looking-Glass: Contemporary Art, Aesthetics and Genderland*, Londres : I.B. Tauris, 2016

- 1 Public discourses on feminism have deeply changed over the past year. The perception of women's movements has been disrupted and redefined in international media space by the Weinstein scandal, the growth of the #metoo movement, and the daily chronicles echoing across the Atlantic Ocean. It is almost inevitable that the events of the past few months should end up modifying, retrospectively, our perspective on the books that were published before or during the recent events, if only because of the new visibility that feminisms have happily (re)gained in very diverse geopolitical contexts.
- 2 This small selection of books offers the opportunity to reflect on the transnational nature of feminist studies, in accordance with the coordinates of a globalized geography that displays different approaches to the problems posed by diverse cultural and social situations. The selection includes a French book on feminisms in the 2000s in France, from the perspective of the succession of women's movements and generations, as well as the modifications which took place over time; a collection of writings on a series of

Australian experiments (exhibitions, laboratories, teaching), where historical feminism, queer orientations, aboriginal questions and input from immigrant women coexist and mingle; and a research developed by a Polish academic in an English university and devoted to artistic practices in Eastern Europe, examined through metaphors taken from the Victorian English writer Lewis Carroll.

- 3 The collection of articles edited by Karine Bergès, Florence Binard and Alexandrine Guyard-Nedelec questions the recent developments of this pluralist movement by offering a sort of cartography of the field, including feminism, women's history and gender theories. The question mark in the title – *Féminismes du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle : une troisième vague ?* – points to the problematic nature of a periodization by successive “waves”, which, however, is common in the historiography of feminism. First-wave feminism is connected to the suffragist movements and the struggles for judiciary equality, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the interwar period (when it was crushed by totalitarian regimes), second-wave feminism stemmed from the new 1968 generation, and displayed a radical feminism that aimed towards women's liberation rather than their emancipation. Third-wave feminism arose in the United States in the 1980s and was recognised as a new “wave” in 1992 by Rebecca Walker. Therefore, there is an interval between the definition of this American “third wave” and its French – and more broadly European – version, in relation to the diffusion “of queer theory developed by Teresa De Lauretis and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and the conceptual renewal initiated by the philosopher Judith Butler.”<sup>1</sup> Although recent events have contributed to the idea of a fourth wave, it is clear that a classification by waves has shown its limitations, and that it is perhaps no longer appropriate to describe the complexity of feminisms<sup>2</sup>: the idea of an alternation of trends and counter-trends seems all at once practical and insufficient for describing the diversity of theoretical and practical experiments as well as the uses of artistic languages in the activist strategies considered in this volume. Although the international perspective only seems to centre on a limited amount of cases chosen outside of Europe (India, Japan, the globalised star system), it is precisely on this point that the question asked by this book shows all at once its necessity and that of surpassing it in the daily actions and inventions of activist groups of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>3</sup>
- 4 Since relationships between different generations are always complicated, bodies are probably one of the unchanging cores of feminist critical development: although over the past forty years concerns have deeply shifted, and theoretical elaboration has hugely enriched our ideas and vocabularies, it is interesting to note, in all these books, that issues surrounding female bodies have spanned the history of the feminist movement worldwide. In this respect, the volume edited by Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore shows the difficulty and weariness caused by the writing of a history that is never dealt with and carried out once and for all. The word “outtakes” refers to cut scenes, meaning the scenes from a film, a television show or a music recording that are not included in the final cut, usually because they are deemed unsatisfactory: the metaphor seems fitting for the situation of women artists, who are always at risk of being cut out of the ongoing narrative of contemporary art, or of only being given a small role. But this time, the authors themselves define and delineate the *Contemporary Outtakes* of feminist perspectives on art. The aim of this book, defined from the start, is to “[reformulate] those speculative interactions between art historical, theoretical, curatorial and studio-based practices that characterises feminist interdisciplinarity and that continue to resonate in contemporary art.”<sup>4</sup>

- 5 The complexity of the Australian context makes it a testing ground for the coexistence of different themes and problems, that are nevertheless faced with the same issues and are understandable through similar categories. At the institutional level, university museums offer significant support as they pay close attention to artistic and theoretical productions subjected to the contemporary art market. The discovery and commercial exploitation of male aboriginal art offers a particularly problematic field for questions of intersectionality, specifically in relation to the activation or reactivation of the usual market mechanisms and exercises of power. In this respect, the contributions of native women artists are fundamental, as they make it possible to understand the social structures and territorial dissemination of workshops, often organised according to rules and methods which are totally alternative to the structures of the art world. The richness of this network is, on the other hand, what constitutes the reason of its difficult relationship with the traditional organisation of contemporary art, which concentrates its creative centres in major cities.
- 6 The voices of native women artists open new perspectives and inspirations, as their models remain largely unknown in the West, and because of their mostly ephemeral production. But the artistic productions of immigrant women or daughters of immigrant parents, also constitute important contributions.<sup>5</sup> As a country of immigration, Australia proves to be a gigantic contact zone, where cultural hybridisations and interactions contribute to the bustling art scene.
- 7 Basia Sliwinska's story also has to do with migration, albeit in the special form of researcher mobility. In her book, *The Female Body in the Looking Glass*, Sliwinska, who was born in Poland, offers a very original reading of the works of Eastern-European female contemporary artists, through five metaphors taken from two novels by Lewis Carroll which the author, like many of us, was familiar with since childhood: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There*. Different elements – the looking glass, the rabbit hole, the White Queen and the Red Queen, the Cheshire Cat, the flower garden – are all used as powerful tools for the interpretation of several works portraying female bodies, in other words “the defining idea and reality of this book.”<sup>6</sup> The artworks by Alicja Żebrowska, Katarzyna Kozyra, Boryana Rossa & Oleg Mavromatti, Joanna Rajkowska, Aleksandra Ska and other artists perfectly support the author's hypothesis, because they were chosen for this very reason (“I chose the artworks carefully because they demonstrate my methodology of illustrating theory in action through analysis of selected examples”). This seems strange from the perspective of art history, especially in reference to Linda Nochlin's valuable indications which aim at creating a method stemming from objects, their materiality and history.<sup>8</sup> Based on solid theoretical grounds, fostered by “French Theory” and several of the fundamental texts of feminist art theory, Basia Sliwinska's book rereads the selected artworks, which are sometimes little known outside of their country, by making their theoretical underpinnings interact with the afore-mentioned Carroll-inspired metaphors.
- 8 The most interesting proposition is probably the idea of a genderland, posited in the last chapter, devoted to the flower garden. This neologism is obviously modeled on Carroll's wonderland. But it also points towards genderland as “a site of transformation and possibility, in which the female body becomes a powerful subject *and* object, challenging myths that imprisoned woman.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, it is an utopian invention that answers “fears, anxieties, longings and desires regarding humans' sexual disorientations”<sup>10</sup>: as

such it is an opening which finally goes beyond the binary male/female logic and postulates a space for the mutating bodies and attitudes of next generations' feminisms.

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## NOTES

1. Bergès, Karine. "Remous autour des vagues féministes", *Féminismes du XXIe siècle : une troisième vague ?*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017, p. 20. Ed. by Karine Bergès, Florence Binard, Alexandrine Guyard-Nedelec
  2. On this point, see Millner, Jacqueline. Moore, Catriona. "Introduction", in *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 3.
  3. See "Table ronde sur les féminismes au XXIe siècle", in *Féminismes du XXIe siècle*, *Op. cit.*, p. 257-272
  4. Millner, Jacqueline. Moore, Catriona. "Introduction", *Op. cit.*, p. 2
  5. See: Gertsakis, Elizabeth. "Florina Prefecture: Women in the Shadow of 'The Magnificent Empire' 1900-1922 and 2017: a Feminist Interpretation of Greek-Australian identity as Explored in Contemporary Art", *Ibid.*, p. 117-132
  6. Sliwiska, Basia. *The Female Body in the Looking-Glass: Contemporary Art, Aesthetics and Genderland*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. 1
  7. Sliwiska, Basia. *The Female Body in the Looking-Glass: Contemporary Art, Aesthetics and Genderland*, *Op. cit.*, p. 9
  8. See: Nochlin, Linda. "Memoirs of an Ad Hoc Art Historian", *Representing Women*, Londres, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 7-16
  9. Sliwiska, Basia. *Ibid.*, p. 143 (emphasis in the original)
  10. Sliwiska, Basia. *Ibid.*, p. 151
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## AUTHORS

### LAURA IAMURRI

Laura Iamurri is a professor of contemporary art history and a doctoral school fellow at the Università Roma Tre. Her work considers the relationship between contemporary art production and the discourses of art criticism. Her recent research focuses on visual culture and networks of artists, journals, critics and galleries during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; the historiography of modern art; feminism and the arts in Italy; the collective memory of the Holocaust and antifascism. She has published a book on Carla Lonzi (*Un margine che sfugge: Carla Lonzi e l'arte in Italia, 1955-1970*, Quodlibet, 2016), whose work, *Autoritratto* (Milan, 2010), she had previously republished. In collaboration with Laura Conte and Vanessa Martini, she also edited her *Scritti sull'arte* (Milan 2012).

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